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FOR THE SECRETARY FROM AMBASSADOR SAM FOX

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/03/2012

TAGS: PREL PGOV BE US

SUBJECT: SCENESETTER FOR THE SECRETARY'S DECEMBER 6 MEETING  
WITH BELGIAN FM DE GUCHT

Classified By: Ambassador Sam Fox, Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: For the foreseeable future, the continuing Belgian government formation crisis gives us no alternative to working closely with the current caretaker government in which Karel De Gucht serves as Foreign Minister. Generally speaking, this is good news since the current government remains willing to interpret its mandate in an expansive way and to continue a broad policy of cooperation with the USG at the UNSC, in the Balkans, Africa, and the Middle East. Your visit offers a chance to continue pushing Belgium to do more in Afghanistan and on similar issues where there is no strongly supportive public consensus.

Such pressure will help us increase the caretaker government's willingness to take the political risks we need them to take.

As always, you should anticipate keen interest in our approach to African issues. De Gucht's other interests include the Annapolis conference, Iran, and Kosovo. End summary.

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Government Crisis continues, but so does Caretaker Government  
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¶12. (SBU) The December 1 collapse of Flemish Christian Democrat Yves Leterme's 176-day attempt to cobble together a parliamentary majority has injected an unwelcome new complication into Belgium's already fractious political scene. While it is certain that the country will not split apart anytime soon, it is not clear exactly who King Albert will ask to pick up the job of trying to fashion a new government. That said, he has asked caretaker Prime Minister Guy Verhofstadt to "seek ways out of the current impasse" and to expand the mandate of his government to cover several urgent items including next year's budget, and certain national security matters.

¶13. (SBU) The crisis in the formation process underscores an often overlooked fact that has become important over the past few months. Verhofstadt's government, in which Karel De Gucht continues to

serve as Foreign Minister, already has grown increasingly bold in interpreting just what it means to handle "current" affairs, the official remit of a Belgian caretaker regime. Since September, the Belgian government in fact has launched several critical new initiatives, a list that notably includes the decision to send a contingent of troops to Chad, where they will participate in the EU's refugee protection mission, and to dispatch a large trade contingent to the Congo.

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Continued Support for Key USG Policies, but need to push for more help in Afghanistan, and for EU-specific Iran sanctions

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¶4. (C) Whatever happens in the government formation talks, there is a good chance De Gucht will stay in his role at the Foreign Ministry; the other likely candidate for that job is current Finance Minister Reynders, who would probably follow a similar policy line. The practical effect of this can only be positive for us. A foreign ministry led by either man means a continuation of his policy of strengthening ties with the U.S., following a roughly parallel course to ours in the Security Council, and of backing international efforts to restrain Iran.

¶5. (C) The caretaker government is reluctant to act decisively in situations where there is no broad public consensus. Afghanistan is a case in point. Arguing that a formal decision is a matter for the next government, the caretaker government is reluctant to extend the mission of the troops now managing Kabul International Airport beyond March 2008. (We have heard informally that the Belgians are planning to stay until October 1, however.) The caretaker regime absolutely refuses to loosen Belgium's restrictive national caveats, or to consider issues like leading an Afghan PRT or OMLT, or to send F-16s. In a similar vein, the Belgians have waffled on the issue of backing strong EU-specific sanctions on Iran, citing the issue as something outside its mandate.

¶6. (C) Outside pressure on issues like Afghanistan and EU-specific sanctions will increase De Gucht's interest in expanding the boundaries of what a caretaker regime should undertake. By engaging De Gucht actively, we provide a strong counterweight to Socialists in Parliament who oppose a more flexible military role in Afghanistan. On Iran, De Gucht will be listening to advice from the business elements supporting his own party, the Flemish Liberals. It is important to remind him how important and effective EU-specific sanctions can be in contributing to a positive solution in Iran.

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What De Gucht Wants

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¶7. (U) The fact of the meeting is the key issue for De Gucht.

He wants to demonstrate that Belgium is still a player on the international stage, whatever might or might not be happening on the domestic scene. With the Belgian public's confidence in the country's political class ebbing, it is all the more important to demonstrate that the U.S. continues to view Belgium as a trusted and important partner. He also

will be keenly interested in learning more about your participation in the Great Lakes summit in Africa, and about Darfur. (We are asking for a separate appointment for Jendayi Frazer with the Belgian experts on Africa.) You can expect him to ask you about the Middle East meetings launched in Annapolis, the situation in Kosovo, and Iran FOX .